

**The Yukon News**

Editorial Supplement to the Yukon News, June 18, 1982

# Alaska Highway 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

## *The untold stories ...*

The saga of the Alaska Highway is not just the story of a highway built through nowhere in nine short months. It is a thousand stories, more than can possibly be contained in one issue of the News.

Over the past two months, we at the Yukon News have heard just a few of those stories — from Watson Lake to Beaver Creek. All had different stories, either one they had lived, or one they had heard from someone else. We met trappers, truckdrivers, cafe owners — all who thought they did not think they had anything to contribute to the story of the Alaska Highway.

Not all of the stories got into print and for that we are sorry. Because of space constraints, some of the best stories had to

remain untold, and many had little to do with the actual highway but were instead local legends that would lose something in the transition into print.

To those whose stories we could not include, we apologize, because these stories too are important in the tapestry of the Yukon's history.

We have some suggestions to the traveller who picks up this special supplement — stop, pull in at every cafe, truck stop and point of interest that you see — talk to the owner, the truck driver, the old timer, the guy drinking coffee sitting next to you. Some of the best Alaska Highway stories are still there for the telling.



Prepared by: Sharon Dalziel, Pat Living, Kevin Shackell, Ted Thaler.

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# They left behind their past to build our future

It was on February 2, 1942 that the United States war department reached a decision to undertake the construction of a highway on a route connecting a series of air bases from Fort St. John in northern B.C., to Delta, Alaska.

The engineers involved in the project were told they only had a few days to prepare a plan for surveying and construction of such a road.

That plan was submitted on Feb. 4, 1942 and the formal directive indicating the plan could go ahead was issued on Feb. 14.

Then, on Feb. 26 of that same year, an agreement was signed by the Canadian and American governments, which stipulated the Americans would pay for the road and then on March 9, slightly more than a month after the decision was made, the first quartermaster and troops arrived in Dawson Creek to begin construction of the highway that has changed the face of the north country.

The progress was rapid and was impeded by the fact there were only four practical access points on the entire 1,600 miles of the proposed road -- Whitehorse and some undetermined point on Teslin Lake. Another possible access route was Watson Lake, by way of the Stikine and Dease rivers but this was discarded as impractical because of the numbers of special rivercraft that would be necessary to transport troops and equipment.

So Whitehorse it was.

The construction of the Alaska Highway, as it is called now, happened in two phases -- the first provided rough minimum roads and the second phase provided improvement and completion. The second phase, they say, was only miles behind the first as the men sweated, and cursed and toiled to complete the road that might have been needed to save their country.

In a directive sent to the chief of engineers, he was instructed that "the pioneer road is to be pushed to completion with all speed within the physical capacity of the troops. The objective is to complete the entire route at the earliest practical date to a standard sufficient only for the supply troops engages on the work. Further refinements will be undertaken only if additional time is available."

Engineer troops, such as the 18th division, were used because it was felt that civilian workers wouldn't work fast enough, but before the road was completed, both civilian and army men joined forces on the project, all sharing in the feeling of having accomplished something.

Then on November 20, 1942, the opening of the Alaska Highway took place at Soldier's Summit, near Kluane Lake.

The Whitehorse Star of that day covered the momentous occasion.

"The dedication ceremony of the official opening of the Alcan Highway held today at Soldier's Summit near Kluane Lake, Y.T. was comparatively brief. Colonel K. B. Bush, chief of staff, Northwest Service Command was master of ceremonies.

"Although comparatively brief, the ceremony was both colorful and impressive.

The story then went on to quote the comments of Colonel Bush.

"All of us here who take part in this brief ceremony today are merely the representatives of others. I wish it were possible for every man who has worked on this highway to participate.

"Those here in this impossible wilderness are the symbols of countless thousands who have made this undertaking a reality.

"I think there is not a person present who fails to realize its significance both in this time of strife and in the peace which is to come. The road will not only influence the course of the world struggles but will be a vital force in the future history of this part of the northern hemisphere."

Even the Star, in an editorial comment on the centre of the front page, paid tribute to the significance of the highway.

Under the headline "The Extended Hand" was written "Few of us in this day and generation can visualize the potential value of the International

Highway officially opened today or fully realize the important part which it will play in the future history and development."

No, perhaps those present at the ceremony did not realize the importance of the highway. The war ended and many forgot the long hours of toiling on a road that at one time may have saved the world. But for those who remained, the road is an important and vital link in our present and our future, as well as in our past.

As the 40th anniversary of the highway is about to be celebrated, we join in commending the men and women who were part of this road, who were part of our history and in so being, outlined our future.

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**Watson Lake Hotel**



# Watson Lake grew with the Alaska Highway

When Vic Johnson arrived at Watson Lake in July 1938, the town didn't exist. "There was nothing," says Vic. "Frank Watson (the trapper after whom the lake and later the town were named) was living a mile back from the lake and he was the only person around," says Vic.

Vic worked as a radio operator with Yukon Southern Air Transport, the forerunner of CP Air. The company used Watson Lake to land its float planes and Vic transferred in from Alberta to live in a small radio shack near the lake. There was no airstrip, no road and no townsite.

seen a dog team before and didn't know which was the leader. "They all looked the same to me," says Vic.

He hooked them up anyway to what looked like a hybrid between a sled and a toboggan, unsnubbed them from the tree stump and "away we went for 100 feet."

Then the lead dog stopped for a nature call. "Then we made another dash, and then another stop." Across the lake they proceeded with the dogs taking their turns stopping and Vic "raving and cursing at the back of the toboggan."

military men and tourists arrived, before the natural history was replaced by new buildings and paved roads. The area hadn't changed much since Frank Watson and his brother came into the Liard country in 1898 and Indians lived on the banks of what was then called Fish Lake.

Vic says there were still remnants of old tent frames and native settlements along the banks of the lake when he arrived, left from a time before Indian legend said the lake was cursed and the native people moved away. All that remained were the rotting frames and

the multitude of fish that gave the lake its first name.

While walking the shorelines of the lake, Vic found a solitary mountain ash, a rarity in the north and deep natural, clay-lined holes left from glacial action and layers of volcanic ash. Now the rare tree is gone, chopped down by highway crews, the fissures are covered by the airport runway and the volcanic dust? "I guess I haven't bothered showing anyone that ash," says Vic.

Continued on Page 4



VIC AND KATIE JOHNSON

The nearest centre was Lower Post, ("originally Sylvester's Lower Post") 25 miles away on the Liard River. In summer he walked the old trail to Lower Post, in winter he used a dog team.

Vic laughs about his first experience with a dog team. "Some joker of a trapper borrowed the team to come this far, and I had to take them back to Lower Post," says Vic. But he'd never

The 25 mile trip ended with a steep descent down the banks of the Liard River, then a dash along the river ice, past a herd of caribou. The dogs smelled the animals and were pulling hard at the toboggan but the caribou just ambled off a hundred yards and let the team run by. It was a quieter life then, and one Vic remembers with fondness. It was a time before the hordes of

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From Page 3

# Americans went as far as the cement

When the war came, the small float plane base became a crucial link in the shipment of supplies to Alaska and onward to Russia as part of the Northwest Staging Route. The airline company began clearing a dirt strip by hand says Vic, but before much of it was cleared President Roosevelt announced the Highway would be built and suddenly Watson Lake airport took off.

The bulldozers pulled in and cleared the strip, the log tower was knocked into shape, and the Americans moved in to set up a base on the north side of the airport. The Canadians followed

later with a base on the south side. That is about the time Vic's wife-to-be, Katie, agreed to join him.

Katie says she was afraid to come to the north before then because she thought it was just wilderness. But with a base established she thought she would give it a try. "I came up for a two-week holiday," she says, "and I'm still holidaying."

When Katie arrived the air base had grown into a good sized settlement. "It was a beautiful little city," she says. The American side had streetlights and cement roads, a little store, post office and a theatre. The homes were

built of log staves, short pieces of wood fitted together like jigsaw puzzles. And across the runway were the Canadians, housed in bright red log buildings.

"Where the cement ends, that was far as the Americans went," laughs Katie.

She cooked for awhile at the small restaurant on the base and became a local celebrity for her corn bread. Whenever the homesick Americans heard she had been baking they would rush over for fresh "johnnie cake" says Katie.

When the war ended, however, the

air force moved on, the Americans being the first to go. What couldn't be moved was torn down or sold. Little remains of the American site except the cement roadways, the streetlight standards and the old incinerator standing at the edge of the airport entrance.

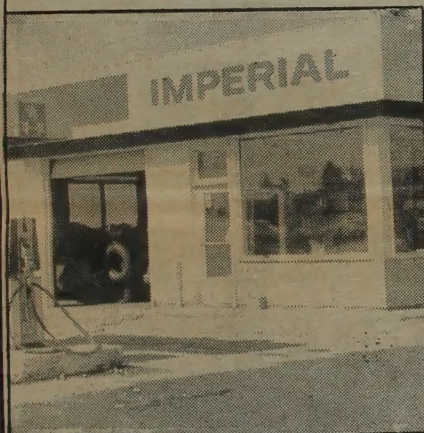
The Johnsons laugh when they mention the incinerator. It was built as an efficient method of getting rid of garbage but on its first day of operation a load of raw sewage was dumped in,

Continued on Page 6

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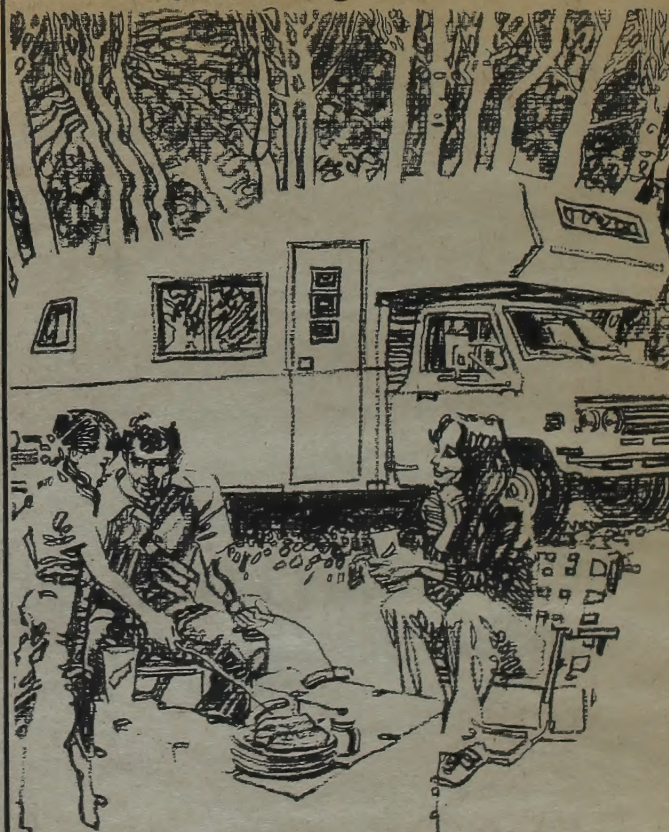
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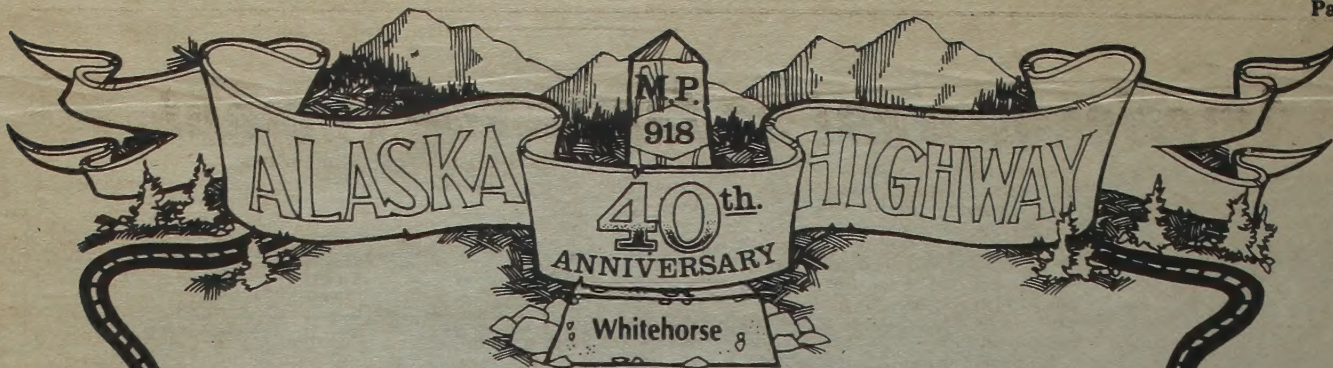
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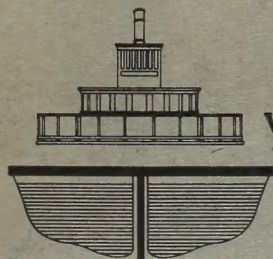
From the Klondike gold rush of 1898 until 1942, the Yukon River was the highway to the north. It was in 1942 that President Roosevelt called for an overland route to Alaska. Thousands of troops were dispatched to Dawson Creek, B.C., the end of steel, and to Whitehorse, Yukon, via the White Pass Railway through Skagway, Alaska. Wartime bombing of the Alaska coast triggered the building of that long-awaited road.

At Soldier's Summit beside Kluane Lake, on a cold November day a ceremony opening the road was held. ONLY EIGHT MONTHS HAD PASSED!

This year we are celebrating the 40th Anniversary of that tremendous wartime feat. Over the years this perilous one lane trail has been widened and upgraded. Towns have grown where camps once mushroomed, the impact on Yukon and Alaska has been dramatic and will continue.

If you're a visitor to Whitehorse, you'll find lots to see during your visit. When you arrive, come to City Hall and sign our guest book. If you worked on the Alaska Highway, we invite you to City Hall — to sign our guest book and to let us present you with a commemorative Alaska Highway Certificate. We're celebrating and you're invited.

For information on historic sites, archives, museums and other Whitehorse attractions, visit the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce at 302 Steele Street.



Whitehorse Chamber  
of Commerce



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From Page 4

# Watson Lake still a "new town"

snuffing out the fire. "The sewage is still sitting there," says Vic with a chuckle while applauding the American workmanship. The incinerator didn't burn a single day but it's still as sturdy as the day it was built he says.

The Johnsons watched as the base slowly faded and another town grew up at the 'Y' where the Alaska Highway branches off to the airport. Oldtimers in the area still refer to the "new town" as Watson Lake Wye. For them the lake and the airport buildings are the

true Watson Lake.

Many of the red log buildings were sold and moved into the new town, to Lower Post or to Cassiar, B.C. when the mine there opened. The log stave buildings of the American homes were harder to move.

Vic likes to tell of the two local residents who decided to move one of the buildings in one-piece rather than dismantling it first. He said the pair put a fork lift under the building and heaved

it up in the air, only to have all the little sections twist out of line so the walls were jagged and uneven.

They then mounted it on three power poles, hitched it to two trucks and a cat and set about worming it out under the power lines onto the taxiway. Once on the runway, they found the ground was too soft to take it off the end so they had to cross the length of the runway, about the time a plane was expected said Vic.

The trucks sped up but the cat couldn't keep pace with them and the inevitable happened. The house was tugged apart at the corners and flopped down over the centre skid in the centre of the flight path.

"They had to get the blasted thing off

the runway," says Vic so they turned the cat around and bulldozed the house into a heap of wood. By the time they were finished, they were left with a huge pile of kindling wood rather than a two-bedroom house.

"I don't know how long it all took them," laughs Vic. He added that after that episode few others tried to move the wood stave structures off the base.

Now that the base has gone and most of the families moved into town, it's quiet at the airport where the Johnsons still live. "Everyone moved out it seems to me," says Vic. But he says it without regret. Watson Lake (the original Watson Lake) has returned to the peaceful days before the Highway came through.



QUONSUT HUT VILLAGE. All over the territory, along what would eventually become the Alaska Highway, villages such as this sprang up, housing sometimes upwards of 30,000 men. In some areas where the men would have to remain longer, the camps consisted of wooden houses. Streetlights were provided, and in some areas, such as the settlement in Watson Lake, roads were paved. (Photo courtesy Yukon Archives)

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# Duo predicts growth for small settlement

When the Alaska Highway came through Watson Lake in 1942, there was nothing there but a few prospectors' cabins and an air base. But two local men knew that more was likely to follow.

William Appleyard, with his partner Clarence Millsbaugh, built a small trading post at the junction of the Highway and the road to the airport. That small trading post has evolved into what is now the landmark Watson Lake Hotel.

Appleyard ran the trading post during the war and then in 1946 expanded it to include a dining room and small hotel. It opened in the summer of 1947 and did a good business until Ap-

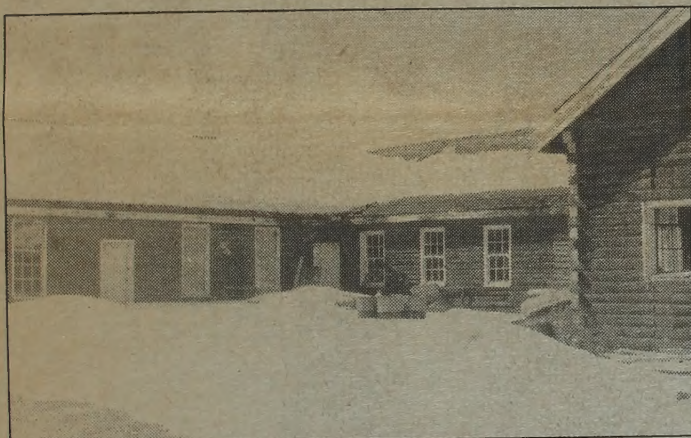
pleyard was found dead of a heart attack behind the counter of the trading post in March of 1950. The estate put the building up for sale and Reita Ball's family took it over.

"We bought the hotel in November, 1950," says Mrs. Ball, when it was still uncertain how Watson Lake would turn out. It hadn't grown much since the war years. The Canadian army maintained their work camp across the road from the hotel, in what is now the territorial public works compound. But other than that the Watson Lake Hotel, complete with trading post, was the only building in town.

Continued on Page 8



REITA BALL and her scrapbook of bygone years.



THE VENTURE HOTEL.

## Their presence lives on

The old Venture Hotel in Watson Lake looks a little lonely now that its doors are no longer open to guests. The red log building has seen better days when its rooms were full, and the dining area crowded with noisy air force crews. But though the floors are now bare and the walls silent, there is still a lot of history housed under the eaves of the old building.

The hotel was one of the original buildings constructed at the Watson Lake airport, and during its years, saw hundreds of airmen come and go. When the crews moved out for the last time, the building, like many others at the airport, was sold to local residents.

The Venture was moved into town to its present location and Jake Melynychuk, who still owns the building, ran it for a time as a hotel before it was finally closed.

Whether the hotel will ever reopen is uncertain, but part of the building is destined to get some public attention in the next year.

One wall of the hotel is covered from top to bottom with graffiti -- but graffiti of a historical kind. The air force men who filled the building during the War years also took time to fill up the wall and their autographs are still intact, written testimony of lonely servicemen in the north. Melynychuk and some of the people of Watson Lake are considering putting the wall on display in their new tourist centre facility.

Plans are not yet final so no one is sure how the wall will be displayed, if the entire wall will be used or only a section of it. A decision will likely be made soon, though, so it can be installed before the centre opens next spring.

When the wall is put on public display, tourists coming up the Highway for the 40th anniversary celebration will be able to search through the scrawled names for those of their buddies or relatives. While they do, they can thank the Watson Lake people who had the foresight to preserve this little bit of Alaska Highway graffiti.



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# Town awaits next step in its history

Hugh Peet came to Watson Lake in 1946, a civilian working with the Canadian army which had taken over maintenance of the Alaska Highway when the American army moved on. The army set up a camp in the compound on the south side of the highway and Mr. Peet joined the 20 or so others responsible for maintaining that section of the road.

When he arrived at Watson Lake, the hotel had not yet opened and for awhile, the biggest problem was finding a good place to eat. Other than the eatery at the compound, which was plagued with frozen pipes, there were only hot plates in the men's rooms or a trip to Lower Post for supper. When the hotel dining room opened in 1947, it was a welcome addition to town says Mr. Peet.

During the next years, the town slowly grew as another hotel, Jack and Mac's opened. A small store was built and a liquor outlet established. The ban on civilian traffic was lifted in 1948 and the first tourist cars started coming up the highway. By 1953, Mr. Peet decided the time was ripe to go into business for himself and that year he opened Watson Lake Motors, the first privately owned garage in town.

He built the red log building from scratch and started out with a four-bay

operation, adding three gas pumps by 1955. Highway traffic was good, and Watson Lake Motors was busy providing repairs, towing, body work and welding to travellers.

At first, 90 per cent of the business was highway traffic says Mr. Peet. "There was maybe only 15 or 20 private vehicles in the whole area then," he says.

He relied on the truck traffic and summer tourists for his livelihood. And it was a good one.

"It was quite a busy operation in the early '50's," says Mr. Peet.

During the tourist season, vehicles would pull into Watson Lake at the rate of about one per minute, looking for gas or repairs to Highway-shocked vehicles. Most of the cars towed trailers behind them, and the extra load weighed down the vehicles, dragging the undercarriage over the rough, gravel road.

"Sometimes we'd fix 10 or 15 gas tanks a day," recalls Mr. Peet.

The trucking firms were regular customers too, three times the number that now use the road. Supplying bases in Alaska or bringing in materials for the north's building boom, the trucks flowed up the highway during the 50's and 60's he says.

Mr. Peet ran the business for 20

years, seven days a week.

The town thrived along with the service station. "Those were better years," he recalls. There were several stores in town, four hotels with cafes, a theatre, and a pool hall. The Highway was busy and so was Watson Lake.

But Mr. Peet says now that the highway traffic has changed, Watson Lake has changed with it. Tourists drive through in their mobile homes and campers and they don't need to stop at the hotels or cafes. The economic growth in the north slowed and the truck traffic declined with it. One of the hotels burned, the theatre couldn't

make a go of it, some of the old businesses closed their doors.

The town is no longer what it was 40 years ago, even what it was 20 years ago. Many of the oldtimers are gone, but a new, younger crowd keeps the town alive. There are more people in Watson Lake than ever before, the Local Improvement District is active, community spirit high.

"The 60's were about the best," says Mr. Peet. Some of the townspeople would agree, but others look to the future. Watson Lake is not fading. It's just waiting for the next stage in its history.



WATSON LAKE MOTORS was at one time, just about the busiest garage in the territory, but things have changed, says Hugh Peet.

From Page 7

"There were two or three oldtimers around, and that's about all that was here," says Mrs. Ball.

She ran the rooms and "eatery" for the next 22 years, serving the highway traffic, the work crews and the locals. The military was pretty well all gone by that time but some stayed on and the town just started to grow on its own says Mrs. Ball.

During the 1950's a new mine opened at Cassiar and another, at Cantung. New businesses opened in Watson Lake to serve the mining industry. Others catered to the tourists. Local outfitters like the legendary Skook Davidson did a good business with fly-in hunters, many of whom stayed at the Watson Lake Hotel. New stores opened, new hotels, new garages.

"It just kept gradually growing," says Mrs. Ball. "It's never been what you'd call a boom town."

The hotel grew with it. The right wing was added, then the left, and rooms upstairs. The tiny beer parlour was converted into what is now the dining room. A bigger bar was added. All the additions were made keeping the style of the old log building intact, including the red paint.

"I never did like that red paint," adds Mrs. Ball.

She sold the hotel in 1972 to the

Archie Lang, the present owner. Archie has added the motel units on the side and maintained the atmosphere surrounding the old building.

Visitors to the hotel can inspect the old photographs on the walls, the trophy horns mounted around the bar and the beat-up old piano in the corner. It's a gathering spot for tourists and oldtimers alike, and Watson Lakers will tell you if you ever want to find someone in town, go to the Watson Lake hotel at lunchtime. After almost 40 years, the Watson Lake Hotel still sits at the junction of town, welcoming weary travellers up the Highway.

*"I'll tell you a story!" said Hobo Ben*

*Of the wonders they did, those road building men!*

*Building a road to God knew where!*

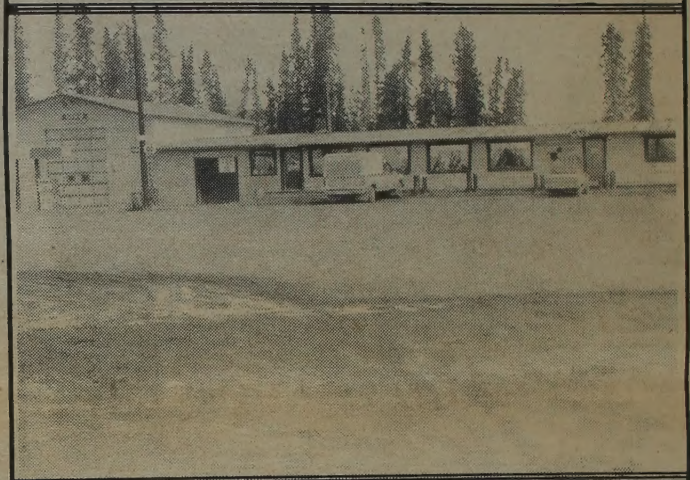
*From civilization to "over there".*

taken from "Down North -- a souvenir of the Alaska Highway Workers", Yarns of the Road by Hobo Ben published in 1943.



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# No life of luxury for this trapper

Hugo Brodell has been tramping the bush country around Watson Lake since 1948. Prospecting in the summer and trapping in the winter, he has walked thousands of miles of the southern Yukon in the past 35 years and intimately knows the hills and valleys others see only from their car windows.

Prospecting is a solitary life. Hugo would leave in the spring when the snow was gone and return in time for the trapping season. Food would be stashed in drums on top of hills and with pack dogs carrying supplies for several weeks, he roamed the area looking for minerals. "You never needed to come back in the summer," says Hugo.

Some years were good, others lean. And there was always competition from the other prospectors who, like Hugo, were looking for mineral deposits big enough that a mining company would take interest.

"If somebody covers a couple of

claims or so everybody else rushes in to stake around them," says Hugo, so often staking was left until winter when there were fewer prospectors in the bush.

Winter was also trapping time. If the summer had produced no good claims, the year's income had to come from the furs. Again, it was months of tramping through the bush, checking the lines, fixing the fur, bringing it back into sell. Lonely at times, "but you get used to it," says Hugo.

It was a time when the majority of people still earned their living from the outdoors, and it provided an adequate, if not luxurious life. When Hugo first came to the area, trappers had been working it for years. "People thought it was trapped out in those days," says Hugo, but there have been 25 years since and trapping is still going on.

"There are good years and poor years," says Hugo. "It comes in cy-

cles."

He said some winters he trapped as many as 150 martin. Others would claim to have trapped over 200, others even more than that. But you can't believe all the stories says Hugo.

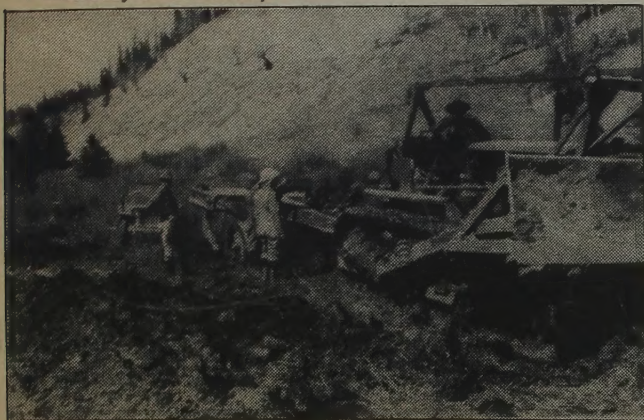
"Nobody brought in the pelts to count them in front of you," he says. "You just talked about them in the bar."

The big game outfitters got their start at the same time. At first Americans were taken in "on the sly," but then licensing and guiding regulations came in, the outfitters were given areas, and the big game hunt was brought under control.

"Too many animals were killed for nothing in those days," says Hugo.

After 10 years of hiking through the bush, Hugo discovered what was later to become the Canada Tungsten Mine. Then it was a steady work on a mining company payroll, helicopter flights into the bush country and comfortable geologists camps at night. "It's real modern now," says Hugo.

He officially retired a year ago but he hasn't lost his desire to walk the bush country around Watson Lake. He may get out this summer again, just do a little looking around. Who knows, he may even find something worth staking.



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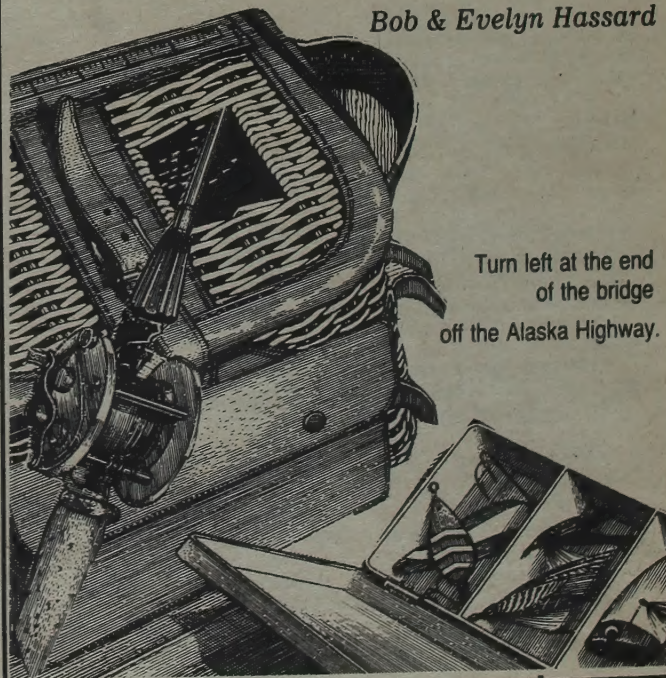
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# The Lament of the 18th Division

Now listen my children, and you shall hear;  
(If that's a new line, I'll kiss your ol' ear)  
But I have a story that's never been told  
Only the censors have got it down cold.

A story about some brave engineers;  
The lads with the shovels that never have fears;  
Who can shoulder a gun or pound with a pick  
Who eat bushels of dirt and never get sick.

They'll fight for their whiskey, they'll drink from a can  
They're tougher than ----, they'll run from no man  
They'll play with they girls, they'll stay out all night  
But when the time comes, they really can fight

But on with the story that's never been told  
Of men and machines, of rain and of cold  
"Where are we going?" and no one would tell  
But before we were through, we knew it was hell.

We left Vancouver in much of a rush  
Keep silent, they said, now hush, hush, hush  
It's a secret you see, this place where we go  
So keep your damn mouth shut and no one will know.

We left there on Sunday, yes Easter for sure  
The city all knew it, and that's no manure  
The wives were all there and mistresses too  
Goodbye my dear darling, boo hoo, hoo, hoo

Mid clatter and clang, we pulled out of the station  
The boys in the khaki, the pride of the nation  
The pride of the nation, the sweethearts delight  
(full half of the train was as high as a kite.)

We rode for four days and then for four nights  
We saw all the country and scanned all the sights  
Four days on the rails and then took a boat  
We prayed for two days to keep it afloat.

Over the water, into the north  
The men of 18th went sallying forth  
There's Skagway ahead we heard a voice sing  
Well, where the hell is it, I don't see a thing.

Ninety-one buildings, and most of them shacks  
The fronts were caved in and shattered with cracks  
It once was a town, that most of us knew  
(If I owned part, I'd give it to you.)

Then into a train quite covered with scars  
A little toy engine, with 'leven toy cars  
Over the rails that were laid in '98  
To carry the gold and pack up the freight

We jerked to a stop, they said we were there  
We looked at the town, we tore out our hair  
Roll out you dog faces, and pull on your shoes  
We'll bust this town open and make them some news.

Six inches of mud lay there in the street  
Six inches of muc all over your feet  
Nothing but water, and acres of slush  
Put on your rubbers, you're going to mush.

So up thru the town, we went on a run  
to the tune of the trumpet and the blast of the drum  
Up on to the camp that no one knew where  
Up on to the camp, a cussin' for fair.

Just thirty three tents, twas scarcely enough  
To hold all the men, their liquor and stuff  
Just thirty-three tents laid out in the mud  
All hell wouldn't have it for money or blood

We'll go to town and see what it's like  
It is two miles down and a helluva a hike  
We'll check on the charges and try all the rates  
Of something that costs you 15 cents in the states.

Two hundred people, and six thousand dogs  
Trillions of skeeters and millions of bugs  
Five or six women there were in the town  
(There may have been more, I wasn't around)

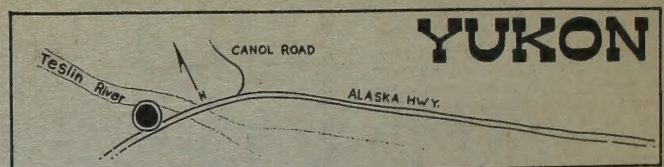
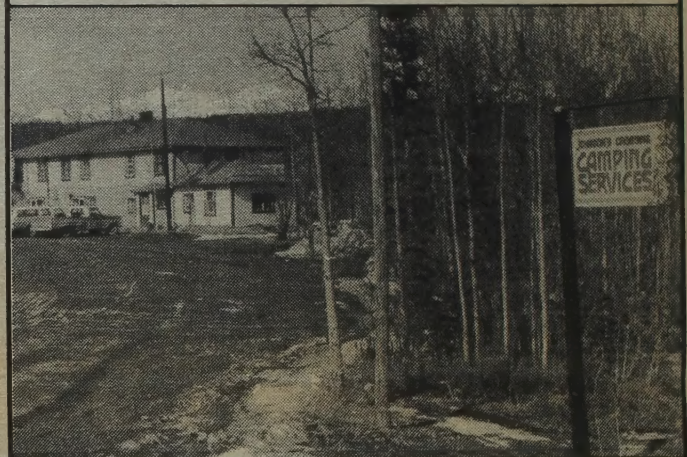
A lady came out and tripped in the slush  
And 17 soldiers were killed in the rush  
Right down on her back, her skirts flying free  
(She made sixteen dollars before you could see)

Forty two days, and forty two nights  
Nothing but bitching and hundreds of fights  
Nothing worth eating and nothing to drink  
Nothing worth doing, but sit there and think  
Now get out your shovel and get out your pick  
We're building a road that is going to stick  
So pack up your troubles and out through the knoll  
For the fighting 18th is going to roll.

So roll up your sleeves and none of your sass  
Wipe off the grin, knock the lead from you ----  
Get out the axes and get out the nails  
Split up the timbers and cut us some rails  
Now build it like this, we'll tell you no more  
So we built it like this and then they got sore  
You do what they ask you, tear out your gut  
And when you get through, they eat out your butt

Continued on Page 20

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## Good memories remain



LODGE AT Johnson's Crossing.

Ellen Davignon (nee Porsild) has only good memories from the war years.

"It was a great time to be a kid on the Highway," she says.

It was an exciting time for the four Porsild children. First there was the riverboat trip down the Yukon River from Dawson City to Whitehorse where they had a new home, overlooking the river. Ellen remembers Whitehorse in those days as a town overwhelmed with soldiers.

"It was swarming with army and air force men," she says. "Mum was always dragging soldiers home after church on Sunday."

The Porsild kids played down on the banks of the river across from the American sea plane base. Ellen remembers the American servicemen zipping out in their little boats, throwing candy and gum to the youngsters.

"To me, Dentyne gum is synonymous with an American soldier," says Ellen. "I guess they were homesick and just glad to see kids."

At Christmas the Americans put on a big concert, with a Santa Claus and presents for every kid in town. Ellen still laughs about her gift. "It was a little blue and white seersucker dress with little airplanes on the pockets. It was the most elegant thing I ever owned," she recalls.

She tells how her younger brother Axel ran afoul of the law when his letters to an uncle in Greenland were seized by local RCMP. His enthusiastic descriptions of the comings and goings at the air base across the river were a little too descriptive to meet wartime censor standards says Ellen.

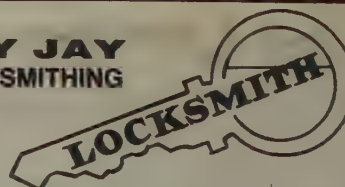
After the war the Canadian government was looking for people to start lodges up and down the Highway, and Bob Porsild thought Johnson's Crossing would be the perfect spot for one. It had been the site of two huge camps, one for the men building the Alaska Highway and another across the river for the crew building the Canol road. The crews had moved on but Quonset buildings were still standing and the spot seemed a natural for a lodge.

Ellen laughs about her father's efforts to convince his family to leave the good times in Whitehorse for the relative isolation of Johnson's Crossing. "He said he would put a bowling alley in every one of the Quonset huts to get us to go," she says.

Ellen remembers how busy the Highway was in those first years. "There was a lot of fear after the war of attacks from the Japanese," she said and rumour had it the trucks were still hauling military arms into Alaska. When people told her the flat bed trailers were carrying bombs she believed them she says and wonders to this day whether they were really bombs or just a nine-year-old's imagination.

The nearest townsite was Brooks Brook, seven miles down the road. "It was quite an active place," says Ellen about the spot which is now marked

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# Teslin woman recalls suffering of Negroes

Virginia Smarch lived with her family at 12 Mile (Milepost 816) when she first heard mention the Highway mentioned. "We heard they were going to build a road, not a highway," she says.

"It was early June when we saw our first machine." Her family was in their boat on the river when they heard it and went to investigate. They stared in amazement as they came upon the huge machines and an all-Negro work crew.

"It was really warm in June," says Mrs. Smarch, and there must have been 20 of them, lying on the ground and the mosquitoes just terrible."

She says that is the one thing she remembers most about the highway, the suffering of the black troops who built the section from Carcross to Watson Lake. "The colored people en-

After Teslin, there was no marked trail and local people were hired to lead the troops cross country to Watson Lake, following routes mapped by airplanes and marked by blazes on trees. "They tried to hit the dry grounds and easy parts," says Mrs. Smarch. "That's why there are so many bends in this Highway. Nobody realized what machines could do."

Her home was a quarter mile from the Highway and during the next years she watched the traffic increase. "I saw all the trucks go by all the time," she says.

"The first winter was a terrible cold winter," she says and the troops had no bunkhouses. Lodged in tents they couldn't cope with the biting cold.

"They weren't prepared for cold weather or they couldn't stand it," she says. "A lot of them perished."

"When I say we never used to get sick, I wouldn't be pulling your leg," says Mrs. Smarch. "We'd have a cold in the spring and fall and that's all there was to it."

But the highway brought different diseases, ones the people had never heard of and didn't know how to treat. They didn't understand quarantines or vaccinations or contamination. Without a nursing station of any kind, the native population quickly fell prey to the diseases says Mrs. Smarch.

A nurse was brought in and the old Anglican Church made into a temporary hospital. When a meningitis epidemic began to spread a doctor was flown in from the army camp at Johnson's Crossing.

"He went back as fast as he could and got the serum but some had

already died," says Mrs. Smarch.

The Highway didn't mean only hardship though. The riverboats which had previously come only a couple of times yearly now came up the river regularly, bringing supplies to the troops at Morley Bay and the Indian band as well.

"When I heard that old boat chugging up the river all I thought of was potatoes and onions, oranges and apples," recalls Mrs. Smarch. "It was really a treat to get fresh stuff like that."

Mrs. Smarch retains her mixed feelings about the Highway. The town is no longer cut off and tourists bring money to the community.

"It was a good change," she says, "yet the sickness was a hard one."



THE ROAD CREWS worked long hard hours and many of them did not survive the harsh realities of the northern wilderness. Indeed, many of them died of the cold and of exposure. They were unprepared for what awaited them as they headed north over the rough terrain, hurrying to build the road. (Photo courtesy Yukon Archives)

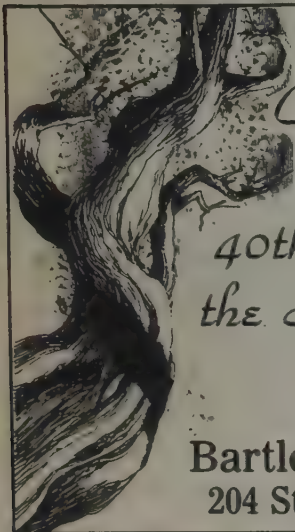
dured hard times while they were here," says Mrs. Smarch.

She and her family watched as the troops went marching by, picks and shovels over their shoulders, following the cats. There seemed to be a urgency to get as much road laid as fast as possible and the men worked right behind the cats, battling heat, mosquitoes, muskeg and black flies as they went.

The road had to be built from 12 Mile to Teslin (a distance of 12 miles) in one day says Mrs. Smarch. "And you know they did it," she says, shaking her head at the suffering the troops endured.

The big camps were built about every 60 miles along the road with tent camps in between. Men unfamiliar with below zero temperatures got stuck or stranded in their trucks between camps and simply froze to death she says.

Mrs. Smarch remembers what the coming of the Highway meant to the native people in the area. The RCMP only allowed so many into town at once she says but they came often to buy moccasins or beadwork. Their visits were sometimes lethal. "All the contagious sickness was brought in with this road," she says. "It wiped out lots of people."



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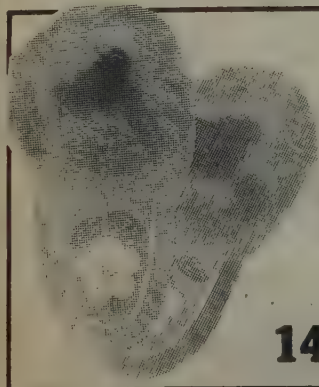
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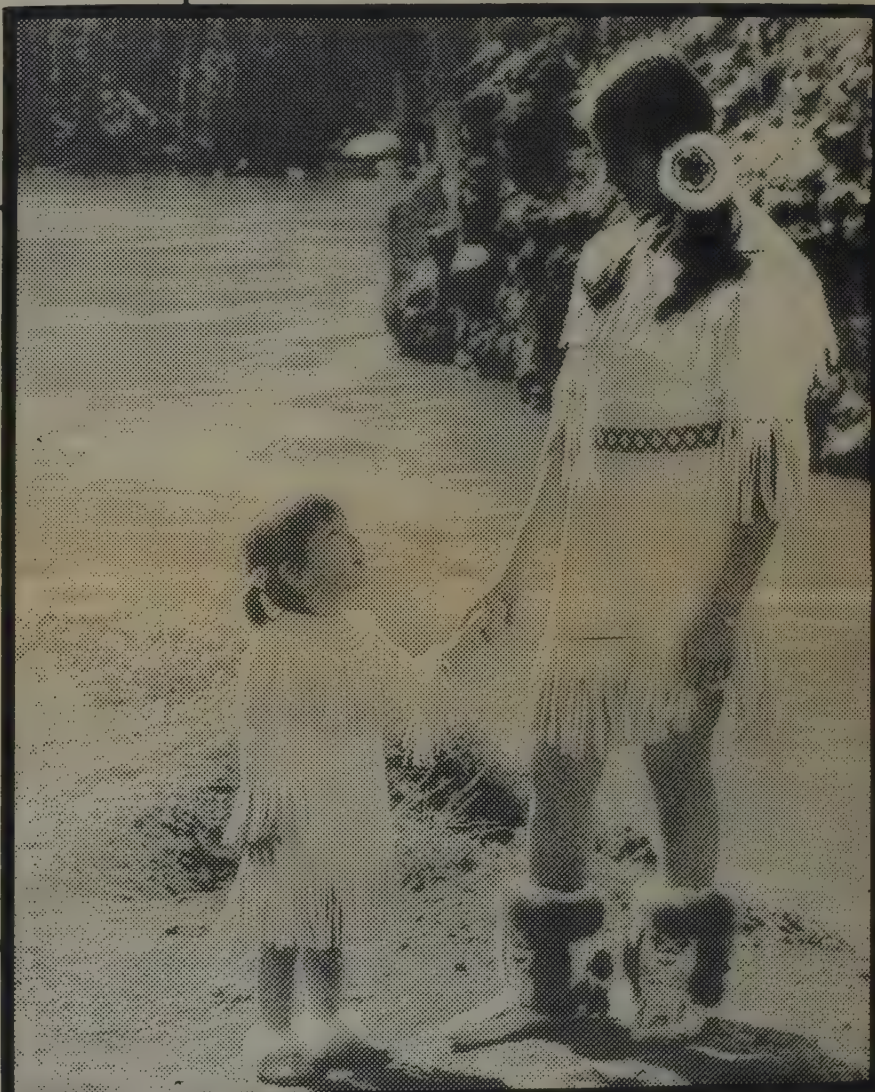
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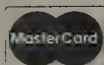
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## Germans wanted to know

Angela Szepesti adds a little twist to the Alaska Highway story. In 1942 she was a Hungarian journalist working in Portugal reporting the progress of the road to Germany's allies.

Mrs. Szepesti explains that at the time, Hungary was officially on the German side in the war. Portugal was still neutral so Mrs. Szepesti was sent to Lisbon by the Hungarian Telegraphic Agency to cull news of the Allied advance from the British newspapers that were available in that city. From December 1941 on into 1942 and through the following years, one of the most interesting stories to the Hungarian and German governments was the building of the Highway says Mrs. Szepesti.

The governments did not have the same reasons for wanting the information, however. According to Mrs. Szepesti the Hungarian regime, while officially on the German side, unofficially wasn't entirely committed to their cause. The Hungarians were eager to hear if the Allied forces were gaining strength.

The Germans, on the other hand, wanted news of Allied advances squashed to keep up its image as a winner.

"Hungarians were only supposed to know the Germans were victorious," says Mrs. Szepesti but her employer wanted her to get other news through. They devised a way to outmanoeuvre the Germans.

"The man in Budapest was a sharp old Jewish journalist," says Mrs. Szepesti and he had her send her news broadcasts on Sunday nights when the German listening in on the Berlin frequency was not as versed in Hungarian as others.

Mrs. Szepesti said she would prepare her notes in advance then broadcast very rapidly to confuse the German

censors. When she spoke about the progress of the Highway, instead of mentioning names like Anchorage or Dawson Creek she would spell them quickly in Hungarian and the German would miss most of the transmission. The Germans knew something was going on, 'but they couldn't catch me at it,' she says.

In those days Dawson Creek, B.C., Alaska and the Yukon were just far away places with strange sounding names she says.

Today Mrs. Szepesti is the administrator for the Local Improvement District at Teslin.

"How strange that after 40 years I should be hearing the story from the opposite side," she says.

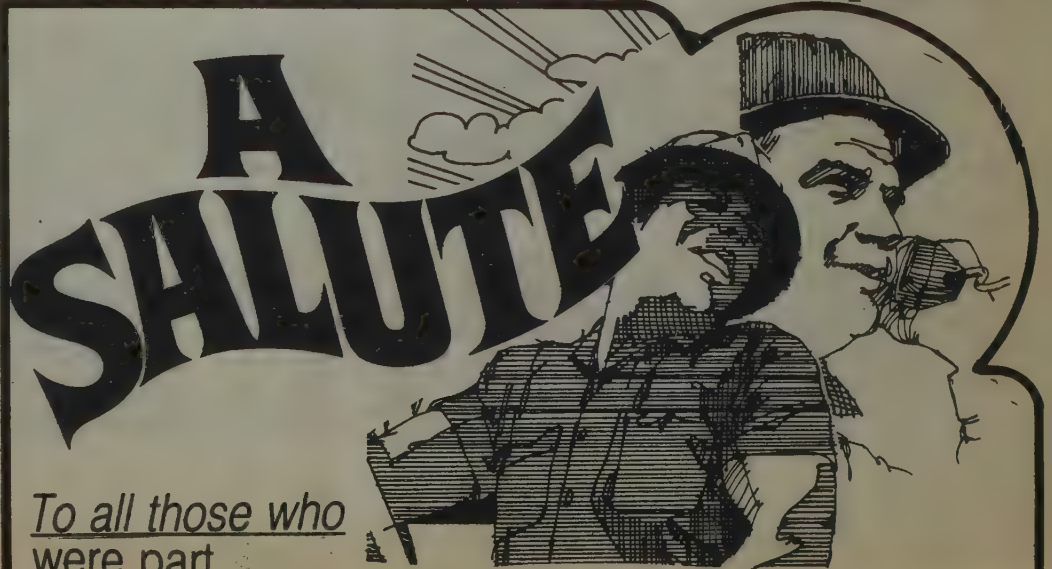
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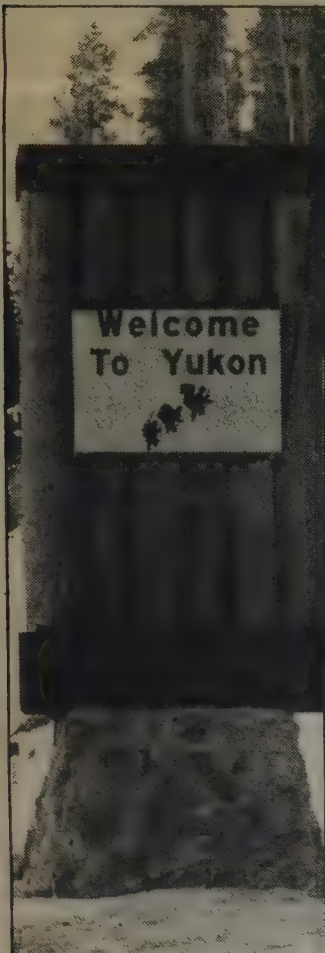
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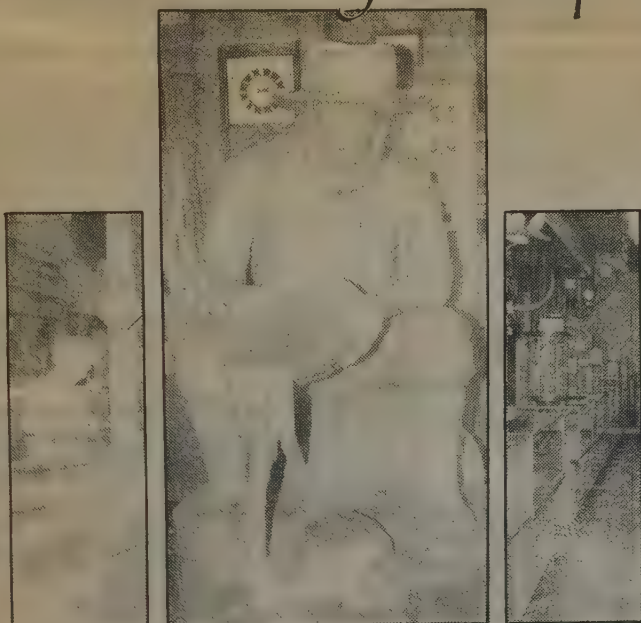
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## Murdoch's Gem Shop

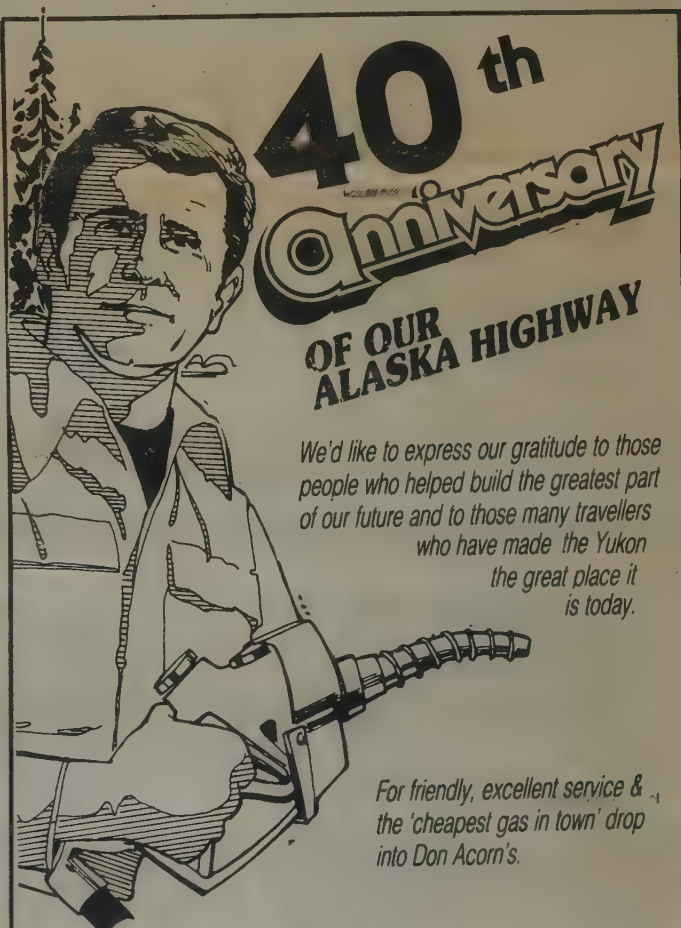


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667-7866  
See Ad Page 20

**ACORNS GULF SERVICES**  
4811 4th Avenue  
667-4003  
See Ad Page 22

**ACORNS MUFFLER & ALIGNMENT**  
153 Industrial Road  
667-2801  
See Ad Page 22  
**HAPPY DAZE**  
127 Copper Road  
667-7069  
See Ad Page 16

**IRVING COLLISION**  
**YUKON FIBERGLASS**  
**TUNDRA SALES**  
111 Copper Road  
667-6315

**MIC MAC MOTORS**  
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6111-6th Avenue  
667-7202

**MIKES AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSION LTD.**  
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667-2181

**MINIT CARWASH**  
2157-2nd Avenue  
667-6664

**2ND AVE. CHEVRON**  
2240-2nd Avenue  
667-6109  
See Ad Page 7

**WHITEHORSE PERFORMANCE CENTRE**  
4198-4th Avenue  
667-7231  
See Ad Page 8

**YUKON SALVAGE LTD.**  
124 Copper Road  
667-6615  
See Ad Page 5

**YUKON TIRE CENTRE LTD.**  
107 Industrial Road  
667-6103  
See Ad Page 9

### Banks

**CANADIAN IMPERIAL BANK OF COMMERCE**  
110 Main Street  
667-2534  
See Ad Page 8

### Bicycle Repair

**BICYCLE REPAIR CENTRE LTD**  
703 Jarvis Ltd.  
667-6501

### Cables & Telegrams

**NORTHWESTEL**  
206 Elliot Street  
668-3434  
See Ad Page 17

### Car Rental

**BUDGET**  
402 Ogilvie Street  
668-4866

**HERTZ**  
4th and Black Street  
667-2505  
See Ad Page 20

**TILDEN**  
38 Lewis Blvd.  
667-2521

### Transport

**NORLINE COACH**  
2157-2nd Avenue  
667-2223

**WHITEPASS YUKON ROUTE RAIL DEPOT**  
1st and Main Street  
668-7611

**Entertainment**  
**QWANLIN TWIN THEATRES**  
4th and Cook Street  
668-6644  
See Ad Page 10

**SLUICE BOX SALOON**  
4220-4th Ave.  
667-2527  
**RENDEZVOUS RACQUET CLUB**  
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See Ad Page 19

**PEABODY'S PHOTO PORTRAIT PARLOUR**  
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### Emergencies

**ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE**  
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**BARNEYS DELI**  
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668-5858  
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**KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN**  
2058 2nd Avenue  
667-7755  
See Ad Page 14

### Hotels & Motels

**KLONDIKE INN**  
2288-2nd Avenue  
668-4747

**STRATFORD MOTEL**  
4th & Jarvis Street  
667-4243

**TAKU HOTEL**  
4th & Main  
668-4545  
See Ad Page 6

**WHITEHORSE CENTER MOTOR INN**  
2nd & Jarvis Street  
668-4567

**YUKON INN**  
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### Newspapers

**YUKON NEWS**  
211 Wood Street  
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### Photo Services

**KEN-BAR COLOUR LABS**  
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### Qwanlin Mall

**CHEEK'S BOUTIQUE LTD.**  
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Qwanlin Mall  
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**KELLY'S STEREO MART**  
4th & Ogilvie Street  
667-2332  
See Ad Page 18

**SANDOZ'S MENS WEAR**  
4th & Ogilvie Street  
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**QWANLIN SHOES**  
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**PEOPLES DRUG MART**  
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See Ad Page 8

**WORKWEAR WORLD**  
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**WOOLWORTHS**  
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**YUKON MARTINIZING**  
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**SUPER VALU**  
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**KITS CAMERAS**  
4th & Ogilvie  
Qwanlin Mall  
667-4525

### Souvenirs

**YUKON NATIVE PRODUCTS**  
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**WHISTLE STOP**  
1st & Main  
667-7611 Ext 127  
See Ad Page 21

**KLONDIKE CREATIONS**  
3121-3rd Ave.

**TRIPLE J ENTERPRISES**  
4129-4th Ave.  
668-6662  
See Ad Page 6

**MAC'S FIREWEED BOOKS & GIFTS**  
203 Main Street  
667-2358  
See Ad Page 24

### Sporting Goods

**NELSON'S HARDWARE**  
2101-2nd Avenue  
667-2346

**KLUHANNI SPORTS**  
2048-2nd Avenue  
668-2525  
See Ad Page 6

**SPORTS NORTH**  
6210A-6th Avenue  
667-7492





VILLAGE OF TESLIN

## Mosquitoes & rivers

"The whole spring we heard about it," says David Johnston. Rumours said the army was building a highway and it would come by the Indian village at Teslin. But nothing happened from March till the end of May and it looked like it was only rumours.

At the beginning of June, "all the men folks had gone beaver hunting," says Mr. Johnston, when the special guides leading the construction camp came into Teslin. They needed men to drive pack horses, following the men who were blazing the trail across the wilderness towards Watson Lake.

"They picked me up for the horses," says Mr. Johnston. He had two of his own and travelled to Atlin to get nine others. Then the long, grueling drive south started.

Mr. Johnston said the trail was unmarked and the bulldozers had only the blazes to follow. It was swampy ground or thick, virgin forest and the crews hacked their way through the bush. After they crossed the Upper Liard, they couldn't find water and that, too, had to be packed in.

There were other hardships. "The mosquitoes was really thick," says Mr. Johnston, driving both the men and packhorses wild.

By the time they neared the end of the trail the horses were near exhaustion and had to be driven every step of the way. "We had an awful time cross-

Continued on Page 19

## Travelling our way...

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## Haines Junction General Store



# Americans brought disease to Yukon natives



GEORGE JOHNSON MUSEUM IN TESLIN.

sing the big river with the horses," he said. Finally they found somebody in Lower Post with a boat so they could

swim the horses across.

"We were three-and-a-half months packing," says Mr. Johnston. "Finally the other workers and us met at a place



BRIDGES OVER Yukon's rivers posed many serious problems for the construction crews, but with perseverance, they managed to ford each one and leave behind a way for others to cross over. (Photo courtesy Yukon Archives)

From Page 11

only by an empty field and shallow creek.

The Porsild children went to school there and Ellen remembers summer picnics and softball tournaments with the people from Teslin. "There was all sorts of competition between the two," she says.

Brooks Brook had an active community club and a curling rink and was the busy home for a dozen families until it closed in the mid-60's.

Ellen says during the years she was running the Lodge, many of the people who lived or worked on the Highway have dropped in to reminisce about the

good old days of the Alaska Highway. "Of course they are all dismayed to find nothing the way they remembered it," says Ellen.

She, also, is a bit dismayed to find how quickly the years have gone by since the Lodge was opened. It's a beautiful spot she says and she loves the long days of summer and the peaceful winters. Time goes quickly as tourists pull in off the bridge, stop for awhile then move on down the Highway, and 35 years have just sped by she says.

"It's hard to believe it was that long ago," says Ellen.

called Contact Creek." It was September 24, 1942.

Mr. Johnston then had to get back Atlin with the horses. "They were run down quite a bit," he says. "There were 11 horses and they didn't have time to eat (properly)." By the time they got back to Atlin, "some could hardly walk," he said.

At Atlin, Mr. Johnston's companion left him to meet another highway crew, so the journey back to Teslin was made alone, on foot. "I was very anxious to see my family," says Mr. Johnston but he in for a tragic disappointment.

The troops building the Highway had been stationed at Morley Bay downstream from the village and allowed

into town only in small groups. But even that contact was enough. Mr. Johnston's family was quarantined with measles, many others in the village were sick, some of the elders had already died.

"The soldiers brought all kinds of sickness," says Mr. Johnston -- measles, meningitis, even typhoid. If it wasn't for the army doctors who provided emergency medical care, the Indian band could have been wiped out. Mr. Johnston, anxious to see his family, ignored the quarantine and himself fell ill for 10 days.

The Highway builders passed through Teslin in a few short weeks, but for the Teslin Indian band it meant the end of a traditional way of life.

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HAINES JUNCTION



From Page 10

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 Down cross the rivers, not sparing the gas  
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 Road made of gravel as spare as you please  
 Roads made of jelly and evergreen trees  
 Roads made of sandstone and two feet deep mud  
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Today there is dust, it's seven feet deep  
 Tomorrow it's muddy, you may lose your jeep  
 Today it is sunshine and all's going well  
 Tomorrow its raining, it's all shot to hell.

They stopped all the traffic and let no one by  
 The general has ordered you, do and you die  
 Stop all the traffic and let no one pass  
 Stop all the traffic or lose your damn -----.

Mosquitoes, ten trillions, I counted em all  
 Bigger than robins and 10 feet tall  
 Nothing could stop them when they were in flight  
 Not even a buzzard would dare them in a fight

So come on you dog faces, and lets hear you bawl  
 You think you have seen it, but that isn't all  
 There'll be more to this story that's ever been told  
 Of men and machines and the 18th so bold

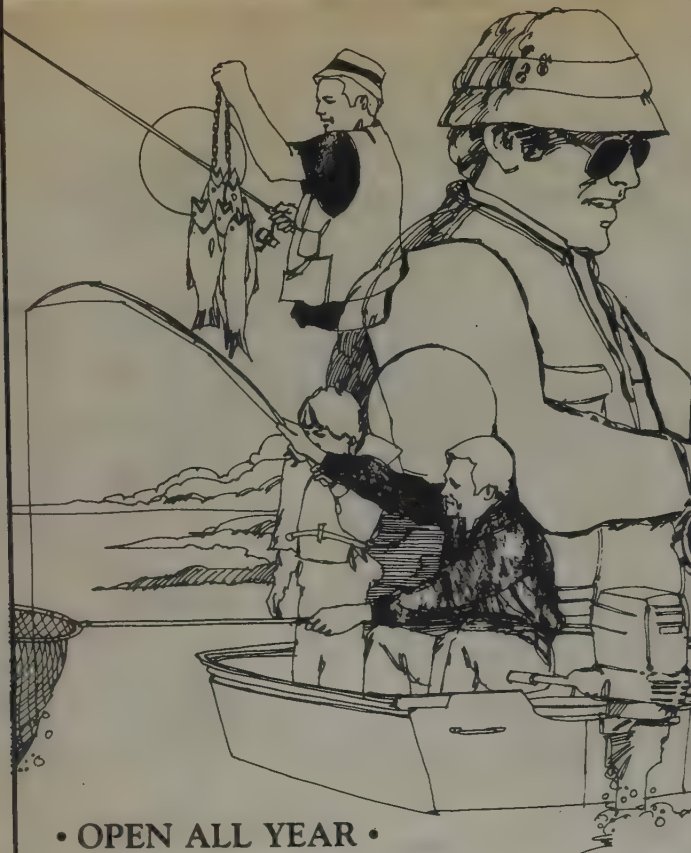
We're up to the present, there's none left to tell  
 Of the country up north that rates over hell  
 And when we get in three year or four  
 Come round by my bedside and I'll tell you some more.

The 'fighting 18th' were the first crew of American Army engineers to arrive in Whitehorse to commence construction of the Alaska Highway. Obviously, they weren't too impressed if this poem, author unknown, is any indication.

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LIFE IN THE CAMPS. Tent cities sprang up throughout Yukon. The one above was situated in Whitehorse. For months on end, the men building the road lived and worked in these camps a long way from home. (Photos courtesy Yukon Archives)







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## Thirty-four a highwayman

Nobody knows the Alaska Highway like Orval Couch of Whitehorse. In the 40 years since its construction began, Couch has logged more than one million miles travelling the legendary Highway.

For the first 34 years of the highway's existence, Couch worked as a mechanic on highway construction and maintenance vehicles.

Originally from Timmins, Ontario, Couch operated a mechanics shop until the Second World War. However, with the war came there was little gas for cars and few parts to repair them with, recalls Couch, making it tough to earn a living.

So in 1942, Couch packed his bags and, leaving his shop behind, moved west to earn extra money working a six-month stint on the construction of the Alaska Highway.

"If I'd of thought when I left Timmins that I wouldn't be back in six months, I probably wouldn't have signed up," he says with a smile.

"Well, six months just slipped by and turned into year after year." Forty years later, he is still living a stones throw from the Highway.

When he came west in 1942, Couch arrived with a construction company from Kirkland Lake which had contracted to do part of the Highway construction.

Initially, he expected to be sent north to work on a construction crew. "But," recalls Couch, "I got shot down in Dawson Creek."

Here Couch became a civilian employee of the American Army as a heavy duty shop foreman at R.M. Smith Base Garage.

He and the 142 personnel he supervised were responsible for maintaining the heavy construction equipment used to build and maintain the highway.

Truck drivers would come in with trucks needing repairs and wait while they fixed. "You worked seven days a week, year in and year out," says Couch. "You might as well have been in a construction camp."

By the spring of 1944 Couch had had enough of the routine life of a garage mechanic. He resigned his position, and returned briefly to Ontario to have surgery on an arm.

But within six months Couch was back to the Highway — this time in Whitehorse. "I went up to see what they had to offer."

In Whitehorse, Couch found a new position with the Highway Maintenance Establishment. During his stint with HME, Couch travelled to the various maintenance camps along the Highway between Beaver Creek and Lower Liard, repairing vehicles.

Travelling in a truck converted into a self-contained mechanic's shop, he would be on the road for periods of up to six weeks at a time. Along the way he would stop at Highway maintenance camps to eat, sleep and work.

"It certainly wasn't like the Waldorf," says Couch describing life in the maintenance camps. "It was rough, it was tough." But he admits, if nothing else, the food was good.

In 1953, Couch resigned from HME because of a conflict of personality with army officials. But his experience and reputation as the best mechanic along the Highway promptly landed him a job with the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

As a master mechanic, Couch again took to the roads, this time as part of a Travelling Repair Team that did inspections on maintenance camp equipment.

He continued to work as roving mechanic when the federal government's Department of Public Works took over maintenance of the Canadian section of the Highway in 1964, and when the Yukon territorial government took over in 1973.

But after logging more than one million accident-free miles, and wearing out at least 10 trucks along the bumpy

way, Couch finally retired from his 34 years of service in 1976.

During his 40 years of working and living by the Alaska Highway, Orval Couch has witnessed an evolution of people and places in Yukon. With nostalgic memories he recalls when life along the Alaska Highway was different.

"Times change, personalities change," says Couch. "There was a time when you knew people from one end of the Highway to the other."

In particular he remembers an occasion when he was away from home and

Continued on Page 23



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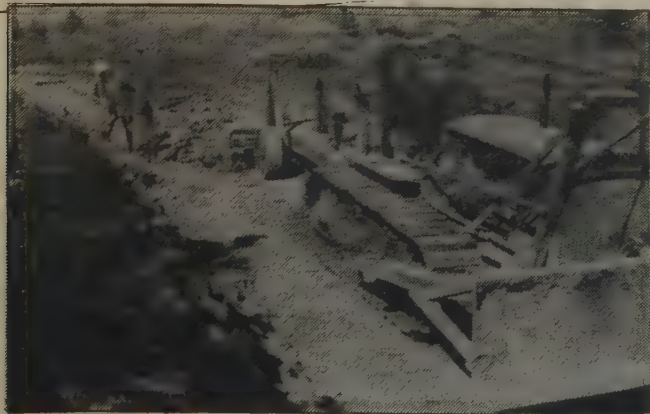
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From Page 22

had to send a telegram to his family. Couch told the telegraph agent to send the telegram to Watson Lake, the nearest office to his home at the time.

When the telegraph agent pointed out that Watson Lake was more than a hundred miles from his home, Couch told the disbelieving man that those were "his neighbours" and they would see his wife got the message.

But besides people, Couch has also noticed a significant change in Whitehorse since he first moved to the area in 1944.

When he first arrived in Whitehorse, says Couch, the streets were so bad you couldn't drive more than a few miles an hour. The pot holes were so large you drove in one side and out the other.

Couch's wife Helen is even less complimentary when she recalls their early memories of Whitehorse. "When we first got to Whitehorse, there was really nothing there," she recalls. "Where the post office is, was a baseball diamond."

And through the years, notes Couch, the Highway itself has also undergone changes. They've straightened a lot of

bad corners, paved some sections of the road, and replaced the pile bridges, he says.

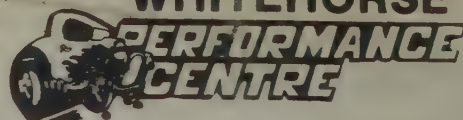
The use of the new chip rock surface has improved driving conditions along many section of the roads by reducing the dust, he adds. "Used to be you had to stay three-quarters of a mile behind the guy in front of you to see."

Even the name of the Highway has changed in its 40 year history. When construction began, the Highway was named the Alcan Highway -- or the All Canadian Highway.

As time went on the Highway became known as the Northwest Highway System. However, as American influence dominated, the long winding stretch through the North eventually became known as the Alaska Highway.

But even though the Highway bears an Americanized name and our neighbours from below the 49th parallel like to claim all the credit for its construction, Couch says they don't deserve it all.

"The Yanks all say they built the Highway, they supplied the staff -- but a lot of it was a Canadian effort too."



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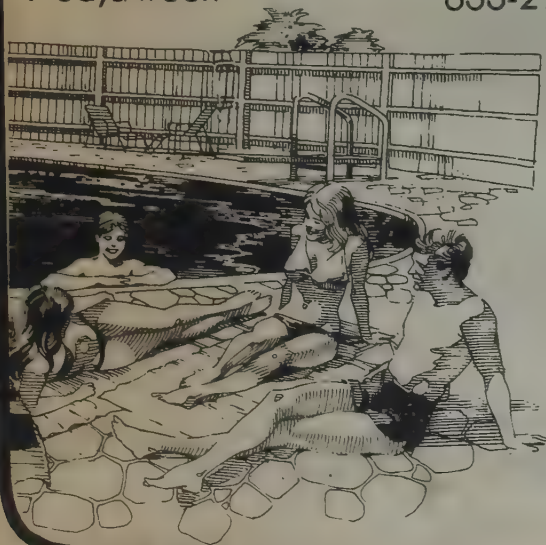
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# Whitehorse has come along since 1942

Whitehorse has come along way since the wars years when Fred Blaker worked as a clerk in a railway siding freight shed.

A sleepy little town of about 400 people, Whitehorse was transformed, in a matter of months, into a bustling military city - the central hub of the massive Alaska Highway construction project.

Blaker had little idea of the crazy months which would follow after the first train load of engineers arrived in Whitehorse from Skagway in the spring of 1942.

Now the city of Whitehorse fire marshal, Blaker recalls those days in a matter-of-fact way, but not without a sense of fondness.

A couple of hundred strong, Blaker said the 18th American Army Engineers arrived in Whitehorse and immediately set up tents in the old RCMP square, not far from the current downtown headquarters location.

By the end of the year, 30,000 troops had arrived and the face of the city was changed forever.

"From that day on, it kept on getting bigger and bigger with soldiers coming in, then the construction crews coming in," Blaker explained.

The White Pass and Yukon Route railway was the first vital supply link for moving men and materials into the rugged Yukon interior. It wasn't long before the tiny transportation company couldn't handle the demands placed on it by the American Army.

The Army's Northwest Service Command took over operation of the railroad in an effort to increase its capacity. Within several months Blaker found himself working alongside

Americans troops, part of the 770th Railway Operating Battalion.

Up to the war years, White Pass had been getting by with four steam locomotives. When the battalion moved in, some 26 additional narrow gauge steam engines were requisitioned from all over Canada and the United States.

"Things were really hopping. The American Army started adding more and more trains until they were coming every two hours," he recalled.

At the height of the road-building effort the record, in fact, was 34 trains in one day over the railway's single track main line.

Countless millions of tons of goods and equipment poured over the iron rails from the Skagway docks to Whitehorse.

Blaker said most of the goods coming in were heavy construction equipment, jeeps, trucks and food stuffs.

Running the trains on such tight schedules resulted in the odd derailment and many near-misses, he said.

"A lot of them were a pretty hairy bunch," Blaker said in reference to the military rail crews' sense of daring. "But they hauled continuous piles of freight, an incredible amount."

An impressionable youth of 18 at the time the highway project started and earning all of \$75 a month, Blaker was more intrigued by the soldiers than the reason behind why they were sent.

"As a kid, a soldier was something to see because I'd never seen any Canadian military men up here," he said. "Years and years ago the only soldiers we saw came from Port Chilkoot (Haines) when they used to come up on

the May 24th weekend to play ball."

Curiously enough, Blaker, who later entered the service, joined the Navy, even though his initial impression was made by the Army. But that's a story in itself.

Upward mobility was relatively easy during the war years and within a short space of time Blaker found himself promoted from freight shed clerk to yard inspector. The battalion gave him a jeep and it was his job to keep track of all the incoming and outgoing freight cars at the depot.

The town's physical size and layout was rapidly changing in an attempt to provide space for the men and equipment.

"Before the big rush Whitehorse was a sleepy little town of 300 to 400 people and maybe 500 in the summertime. Some said it grew to 30,000, although I can't prove that figure."

Blaker, whose family lived on the southern edge of town near the old railway roundhouse, saw a mess hall and

Continued on Page 25



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# Liquor was the only thing to be rationed

barracks built nearby. What used to be bush from Hawkins Street South was soon criss-crossed by roads and hastily erected Army buildings.

"That used to be my hunting area down on the flats for rabbits and ptarmigan during the winter," he said.

The original concentration of engineers at the RCMP compound moved up above the escarpment where the CN telecommunication complex is now located.

In addition to the Army barracks and massive freight depots, private construction companies from the United States set up headquarters in Whitehorse. One of the largest firms, Dowell Construction, covered the entire area where Super Valu and the Klondike Inn are now located.

"McCrae was a huge bloody area too. It must of had a warehouse 1,000 feet long by at least 150 wide," Blaker recalled.

All the construction companies were American and a number of locations in the city were named after the firms which occupied their premises. The White Pass Utah siding where Cyprus Anvil concentrates are now loaded onto trains is one place which was named after an American construction company.

Life changed dramatically for Whitehorse residents during the war years, nor has it been the same since.

The military personnel stationed in town were a self-contained unit with mess hall, recreation facilities and barracks. Even today, 40 years later, people can see decaying barracks, rusting quonset hut and crumbling warehouses all built by the military.

Very few things were ever in short supply during the construction project and Blaker said only the odd item would be rationed.

With the Blaker home so close to the railroad battalion mess hall, the fami-

ly always received food stuffs from generous cooks.

"My parents practically didn't have to buy groceries when our house was only 150 yards from the mess hall. Our grocery bills went down during the war without a doubt," he said.

Although the troops stuck pretty well to themselves, Blaker said there was no written rule saying civilian and Army personnel couldn't mix. Many of the town's residents were able to cash in on the Army freebies, especially those who worked with the outfit, and many did.

There were two privately owned movie theatres in town but the Army had its own theatres and flicks. Often times Blaker would manage to get into the Army theatres through people he knew at work.

He remembered getting in on the world premier of the U.S. military public relations film "This is the Army," which was shown at the large Tita Theatre which was located at Utah siding.

Riding the military bus system (not as refined at Whitehorse Transit) also didn't present any problems if a person had the right connections.

Even though Whitehorse was in a boom cycle — the greatest since the gold rush — Blaker recalled inflation wasn't a problem. Prices remained stable, and as mentioned previously, rationing was almost non-existent.

To Blaker's consternation, the one commodity which did undergo rationing was liquor. He said each person was allowed one 26 ounce bottle and a dozen beer each month.

With all the American goods coming in and the wide-spread generosity, Blaker often wondered how the local stores managed to compete.

"My own opinion is that local stores almost gave up selling cigarettes because you could get them for 50 cents a

carton from the Army," he explained.

The beehive of activity which occupied both military and civilian lives wasn't without the odd momentary respite.

The Alaska Highway, south and north of Whitehorse, although little more than a donkey cart track in its early stages, provided access to good fishing spots.

Once again the free and easy U.S. soldiers proved their generosity.

"During the war we would get a command car and go into the bush at Marsh Lake to fish," he recalled. "The fishing was fabulous in those days... Army boat, Army grub and away we'd go."

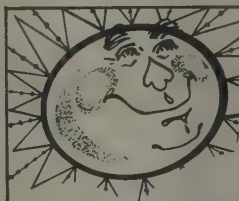
The war dragged on and Blaker got

the urge to join the Royal Canadian Navy when he was out on vacation in Vancouver. The year was 1943 and Blaker spent the next two years doing convoy duty bouncing around on the North Atlantic in frigates and corvettes.

When he was discharged he came back to Whitehorse in 1946, just as the Army was starting to pull out.

He joined the fire department in Whitehorse in 1947 and has been at it ever since.

The town slowly retreated back to its pre-war size, but the buildings remained. And now, 40 years later, Blaker is still fighting fires in buildings constructed by the Americans during the war as temporary quarters.



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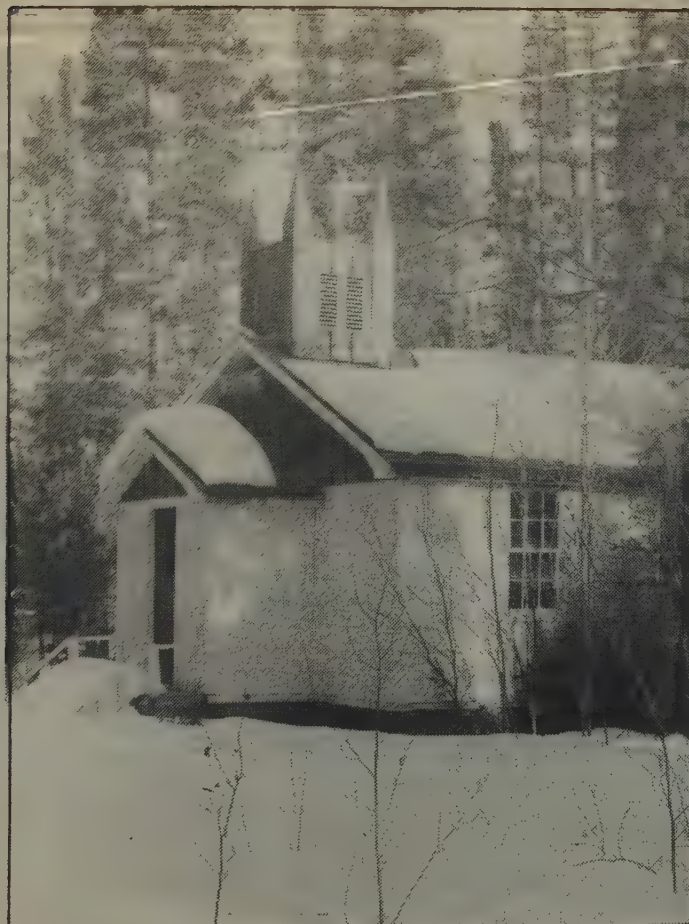
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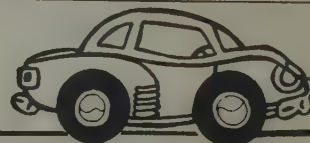




THE OLD BAPTIST MISSION still stands in Upper Liard. Liard is the only settlement in this part of the country and predates Watson Lake.



THE BOYS OF THE 18th, the band of Army engineers who were so instrumental in getting the highway through. (Photo courtesy Yukon Archives)



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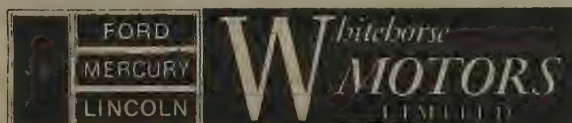
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# Local legends abound about lodge owner



WORKING AROUND KLUANE LAKE CIRCA 1942 (Photo courtesy Yukon Archives)



THE ROAD AROUND KLUANE TODAY.



HORSES GRAZING along the highway near Haines Junction. When the road was being built, there were few animals other than those brought in as pack animals.

Haines Junction and the Kluane National Park both date from the coming of the Alaska Highway. Though there had been people in the area for many years prior to the war, the townsite itself did not take off until the engineering crews came through in the summer of 1942. A year later authorities decided to establish a game sanctuary in the area.

According to park interpreter Brent Liddle, the Kluane region had been a home for gold miners since the turn of the century. On July 4, 1903 Skookum Jim and Tagish Charlie, the pair who had discovered gold near Dawson City, again hit pay dirt on a little creek

flowing out of the St. Elias Range. A second gold rush started in that area and during the next few years miners staked every creek and stream flowing into Kluane Lake.

The two largest settlements in the area were Jacquot Landing (now called Burwash Landing) at the north end of the lake and Silver City at the southern end.

Supplies had to be brought from Whitehorse to Silver City where they were loaded on barges and carried to the far end of the lake.

Continued on Page 28

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From Page 27

# Highway replaces wagon trail used since 06

Liddle says the Kluane wagon road from Whitehorse to Silver City was built in 1906 and was well used until 1941. When the announcement came that the Alaska Highway was to push through that region, engineers followed the wagon route for much of the route to Kluane Lake and portions of the old road can still be seen on the drive to Haines Junction.

Between 1906 and 1941, however, travellers on the road had to rely on lodges spaced about a day's ride apart for food and accommodations. One of the earliest, and the only one still operating, is what is now known as Mackin-

tosh Lodge six miles north of Haines Junction.

Local legends have sprung up about colorful Dorothy Mackintosh and how she finagled her way into having the Alaska Highway pass through her property.

According to one story, the Highway was to have been built straight through from Pine Lake to a point several miles north of the Lodge, rather than take the bend south into Haines Junction and then a northern jog. But Mrs. Mackintosh seems to have had some pull in the area for the route was changed so it passed through her prop-

erty.

Whether it is true the US army engineer was her nephew or whether she just had some strong political clout, the Highway was rerouted at the last minute. According to Liddle, a few miles of road were built on the section north of Pine Lake before the crews backtracked and headed south to what is now Haines Junction.

During the same time a road was being pushed through from Haines, Alaska to bring supplies up from that port city, and at the spot where the Haines Road meets the Alaska Highway, the townsite of Haines Junction

sprang up.

During the next years the town prospered as did the Mackintosh Lodge. Mrs. Mackintosh has been dead for some years now, and the lodge has passed to other hands, but oldtimers in the region still love to talk about this early Yukoner and how she brought the Alaska Highway to Haines Junction.



## Talbot Arm Motel Ltd.

Open Year-Round

(We cater to all bus tours, overnight & for lunch stops)

- Newly constructed Dining and Cocktail Lounge - seats 150
- All beverages served
- Newly constructed 28-room Motel, reasonably priced
- Groceries, souvenirs, package liquor

— Chevron service, all standard products, dumping station, propane.

— Chevron & Affiliated credit cards honoured, Mastercard & Visa

### DESTRUCTION BAY

KM 1743 MILE 1083

PH. 841-4461 Alaska Highway

## on the shores of beautiful Kluane Lake...



## BAYSHORE MOTEL

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## Esso Service

HOURS: 7:00 am — 11 pm

• Cafe ~ with home cooking •

- Souvenirs • Groceries •
- Minor Repairs & Welding •
- Regular & Unleaded Gas •
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## Modern Motel Units

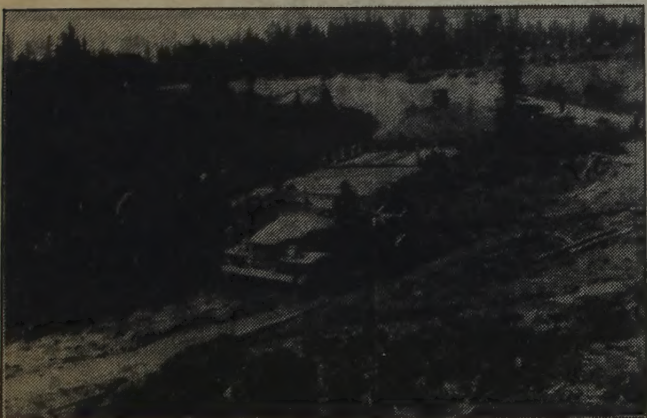
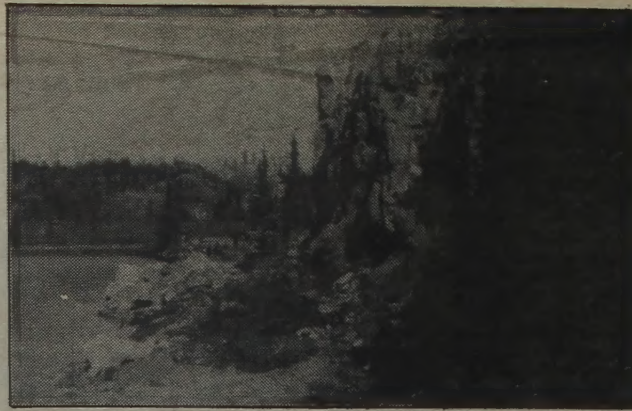
With Showers

Your Hosts  
Julius & Connie Dyck

KM 1272 MILE 1064

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IT WAS ALL HARD WORK and not much play for the boys who were building the road. Often they worked in the mud and the swamp for days on end but they did get a bit of respite and one way was playing in the company band. (Photos courtesy Yukon Archives)

## Stories stay the same

If there is one thing Highway people have in common, it's their stories. They may not have lived along the route for its entire 40 years but they have stories of their area just the same, stories gleaned from the oldtimer sipping his tenth cup of coffee at the highway cafe or from the group ordering another round in local bar.

A Destruction Bay resident repeats the story told him by an Alaskan of a daring escape from Whitehorse in the days before the Highway was opened for traffic.

The man, we'll call him Bert, wanted to shake off the clamour of wartime Whitehorse for the goldfields in Alaska but he was stymied in his attempts to get there. The army had

control of all the available vehicles and material and forbade traffic down the Highway.

So the enterprising Bert spent a summer packing boards down to the Yukon River, hiding them along the banks until he had enough to build himself a raft. Then one dark night he and his true love climbed aboard the raft and eloped off down the Yukon River.

The Destruction Bay man says Bert and his love sailed all the way to Alaska where they have been ever since. Or so goes the story. There may be some doubt as to the authenticity of the tale, but the teller is in no hurry to disprove it. It's a little bit of Alaska Highway mythology that makes for good telling when the next set of tourists comes round.

# White River Lodge Ltd.

KM 1880

MILE 1169

9 Rooms & Cabins

- Home cooking
- Regular & Unleaded Gas
  - Diesel
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Your hosts

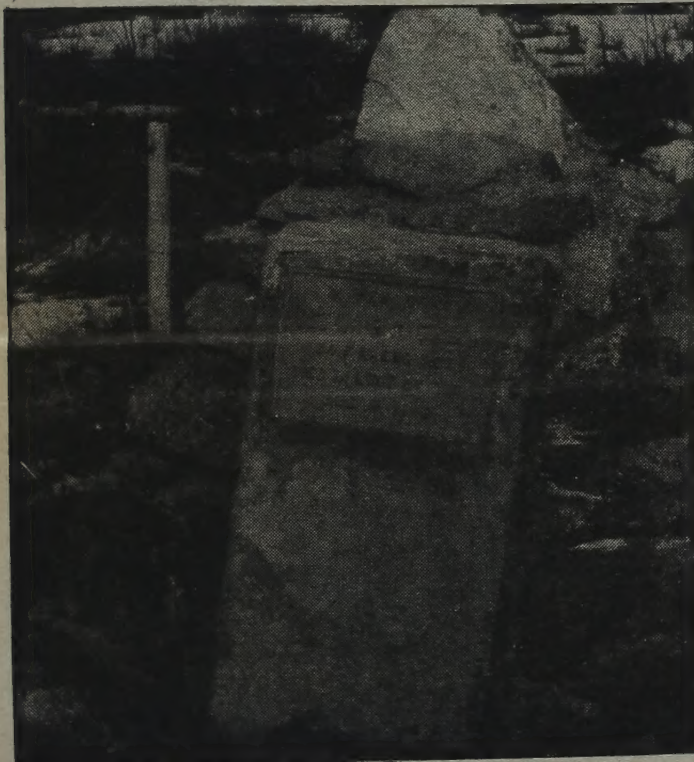
Norma & Tom Bradley



# Roadside cafe becomes an institution



IDA'S in Beaver Creek, home of good country cooking.



MONUMENT TO A SOLDIER who died here during construction of the highway. He was just one of many who lost their lives on the road. This man died near Beaver Creek.



AN ABANDONED TRAPPER'S CABIN. This area is just ripe with cabins abandoned by trappers and prospectors. Most of the creek in the area are named after them.

Ida's is a Beaver Creek institution. Like the hundreds of other cafes scattered along the length of the Highway, Ida's has thrived for years selling good cooking, good service and small town hospitality.

According to Claire Weiss, who ran the motel and cafe for the past 10 years, Ida's was the brainchild of her sister Ida McCabe.

From its location right beside the Highway in the middle of town, Ida's has seen thousands of truckers, tourists and highway workers step across its wooden doorsill during the past 30 years.

In fact there was an Ida's Motel before there was a Beaver Creek. The spot is an important one in Alaska Highway history - Cpl. Refines Sims Jr. and the 18th Army Engineers, moving south from Fairbanks, met Pte. Alfred Jalufka and the 97th Engineers working north from Whitehorse at the spot on Oct. 20, 1942 - yet a town didn't develop in the area until the early 1950's, largely as a result of the establishment of Canada Customs.

Continued on Page 31

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at

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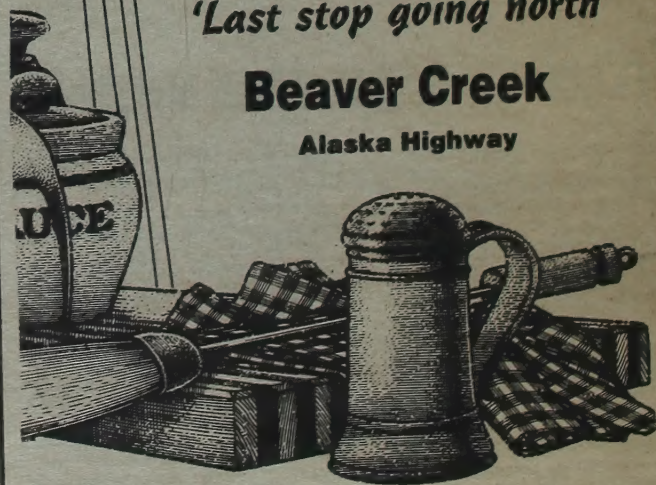
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*'Last stop going north'*

**Beaver Creek**

**Alaska Highway**





# Good service, hospitality and homemade pies

The Customs buildings had been located at two locations further along the Highway, one near the Alaska-Yukon border and the other at Snag Creek. Customs officer Gene McCabe ran the latter for 18 months until the building was moved to Beaver Creek in 1948 because of an insufficient supply of water at Snag Creek. Beaver Creek grew up around the Customs Centre.

Until that time the largest centre was the village of Snag, now standing abandoned 17 miles off the Highway.

There were few other lodges or eateries on that section of the road and it didn't take long for Ida McCabe to realize the potential for a good business.

In 1953 she opened Ida's, a building made of peeled and bleached logs from

the district. But three weeks later disaster struck in the middle of the night and the building burned to the ground. Ida was left with only some melted silver dollars for her hard work.

According to Claire Weiss, the only thing her sister could do was order in pre-fab buildings from Edmonton and start over. The cafe, bar and four rooms formed the basis of what is today's Ida's Motel.

Mrs. Weiss says over the next years, Ida's catered to the highway crews, tourists and truckdrivers who passed through the area. In the 1950's, particularly, it was busy as large work camps were established during the summer to upgrade that portion of the road.

It was impossible to sit everyone in

the dining area, so the large room in the back was converted to eating space. Between 70 and 80 men at a time would crowd into the mess hall during the summer, waiting their turn for Ida's home cooked meals.

Mrs. Weiss bought the operation from her sister in 1972 and continued the service that brought highway travellers back again and again. She says the cooking was a major part of keeping customers happy.

Mrs. Weiss says Beaver Creek has changed in the years she has known it. At one time, each of the four motels in town had a cafe but now tourists in campers and caravans mean the cafes get bypassed. Not so 10 years ago,

when a highway stop meant more than just gas and a clean windshield.

"I could never, ever make enough pies," says Mrs. Weiss. Truck drivers and tour guides would make a habit of stopping on their route for some of her home baking. Her rhubarb pie in particular was a big seller and she could never keep up with demand.

"I think I make a pretty good pie," says Mrs. Weiss, based on the comments of a decade of satisfied highway travellers.

Ida's is under new management this spring but the traditions surrounding the motel continue. It still has good service and small town hospitality. And, you guessed it, homemade pies.

## 'Slick as cat manure'

Dorothy Thompson is the post mistress at Port Alcan, the border station on the boundary between Alaska and Yukon.

An Alaskan since the end of the war, Dorothy recalls an early trip up the Alaska Highway.

The road had just opened to civilian traffic so she and her husband decided to drive their new truck to Anchorage. There were no such things as lodges in those days so they camped out in a lean-to beside the truck. It was late fall and roads were bad.

"It was a rugged trip," says Dorothy. When they weren't stuck they were being towed along behind cats or trucks. "We were pulled through most of it," she says.

Miles and miles of the route were unsurfaced and had turned into a quagmire from autumn rains, chewed up the heavy highway traffic. What little surface was treated "was slick as cat manure when it got wet," says Dorothy. The whole route was just one

long stretch of holes and mud she says.

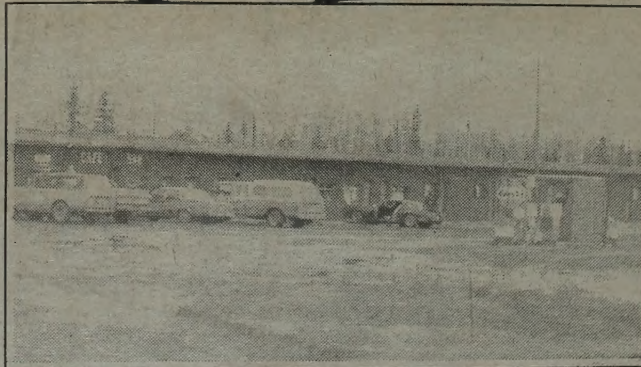
In the years since that first trip, Dorothy has had occasion to travel the road many times. She has seen the lodges change hands, the people come and go. Now she isn't sure if any of the lodges have their original owners or if they have all moved on.

The highway community is closely knit and Dorothy talks fondly about socializing with the people in Beaver Creek. There was always an active community club there she says and weekend get-togethers still bring the Alaskans and Yukoners together. The Canadians and Americans in this section of the highway don't have much use for national nametags. They are simply neighbours and good friends.

Dorothy says the Highway has changed in the years she has known it, and she is not sure whether it's for the best. Her memories of early trips up it are vivid. "If they paved it all, tourists wouldn't have a damned thing to remember," says Dorothy.

## Welcome to Ida's Motel & Cafe 1982

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Under New Management;  
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To help you enjoy your stay we offer the following conveniences;

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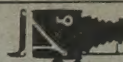
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